DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 087 589 RC 007 646

AUTHOR Noblit, George W.
TITLE The Adolescent Experience and Adult Success: A Nonmetropolitan Investigation.
PUB DATE Feb 74
NOTE 11p.; Paper prepared for the Rural Sociology Section, The Southern Association of Agricultural Scientists, Memphis, Tenn., February 1974

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescents; *Adult Characteristics; Delinquent Identification; Failure Factors; Grades (Scholastic); Peer Groups; Research Projects; *Rural Education; *School Environment; Socioeconomic Status; *Success Factors; Tables (Data)
IDENTIFIERS *Oregon

ABSTRACT

The research project examined the relationship between the adolescent experience and adult success as the result of social class origins and educational attainment. Studying the effects of variables in the adolescent experience upon access to success, this investigation examined 3 aspects of adolescence--school status, peer group involvement, and official delinquency. The data were abstracted from the Marion County Youth Study, an ongoing longitudinal panel study of adolescent males in western Oregon. School status was indicated by the respondent's cumulative grade point average. Peer group involvement was indicated by the respondent's estimate of the average number of hours spent with friends during the week. The last independent variable, delinquency, was obtained from court records. The 2 measures of access to success--educational attainment and adult socioeconomic status--were obtained from questionnaires. Conclusions indicated that the school procedures and policies themselves may well have an effect upon an adolescent's commitment to conventional success, although peer group involvement did not affect access to adult success as expected. Lastly, the delinquency label seemed to be part of the institutional build up of labels that often begins with labels about academic ability. (FF)

ED 087589

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by

George W. Noblit
Department of Sociology
Memphis State University
Memphis, Tennessee

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Paper Prepared for the Rural Sociology Section of The Southern Association of Agricultural Scentists, Memphis, Tennessee, February, 1974.

RC007646

THE ADOLESCENT EXPERIENCE AND ADULT SUCCESS: A NONMETROPOLITAN INVESTIGATION*

by

George W. Noblit
Department of Sociology
Memphis State University

Adult success, whether it be defined in terms of education, occupation or income has traditionally been seen to be the result of two major factors: social class origins and educational attainment. Blau and Duncan (1967), for example, found both to be important factors in adult occupational status, with educational attainment by far more important than social class origins. Similarly, Kelly and Pink (1970) found school status to be a better predictor of adult success than social class origins. In spite of these findings, there has been little systematic investigation of the effects of variables in the adolescent experience upon access to adult success.

Research on adolescents has recently led to a re-evaluation of the importance of one's social class origins in explaining such things as youthful deviance and delinquency. Numerous self-reported studies have found deviance to be prevalent throughout the social class structure (Voss, 1966; Dentler and Monroe, 1961; Empey and Erickson, 1966). Further, Empey and Lubeck (1971) suggest--that the social class origins--official delinquency relationship is not universally negative. Kelly and Pink (op. cit.) were building on such notions when they began looking at the character of the school experience, and not the quantity of it, as a factor affecting post-school careers.

It would seem, then, that a systematic examination is in order of the relationship between the adolescent experience and adult success. For the purposes of this investigation, we will examine the effects of three aspects of adolescence-- school status, peer group involvement and official delinquency--upon access to adult success.

As we have already noted, Kelly and Pink (op. cit.) have indicated the importance of school status in adolescence for one's post-high school access to opportunities. However, we wish to re-examine this looking at young adults who are somewhat older. It certainly would seem that the academically successful in high school would be more

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Author's note: The research on which this paper is based was supported by funds granted by the National Institute of Mental Health (Grant MH 14806 "Maturational Reform and Rural Delinquency"). The author is endebted to the Memphis State University Computer Service for providing computer time and to Barbara Pudgett for her assistance in data processing and constructive criticism.

likely to have a full range of educational and occupational options open to them in adulthood than would the academic failures.

It would also seem that the involvement one has with a peer group would affect adult success. The adolescent who spends much of his time going out with friends may not be committed to school work, and further may not be caught up in the usual kinds of activities such as sports, clubs, etc. that become part of the career of the youth who is to become successful in adulthood. Peer group activity may well be an alternative to the activities of the 'straight,' committed adolescent. Its values may even be opposed to success in the conventional world as Miller (1958) suggests.

There is some evicence which suggests that a label of delinquent severely restricts occupational options. Schwartz and Skolnick (1964), for example, found that any sort of involvement with the criminal justice system, even if acquitted for that involvement, restricted job opportunities. Robins, Gyman, and O'Neal (1962) also found that police contact as a juvenile inhibited upward social mobility. Thus, if one is officially delinquent we would expect access to adult success to be less than for the officially nondelinquent.

It also seems to be important to understand how these three variables interact in explaining access to adult success. Polk and Schafer (1972) suggest that the school is the all-important factor in explaining peer group involvement and, especially, delinquency, as well as adult success. We suspect this to be the case. The school experience should have the strongest relative effect upon access to adult success. Further, since official delinquency seem only to be youth who were apprehended, and since most delinquency takes place in a group situation, peer group involvement should have next strongest relative effect. Delinquency should have the least effect on our three independent variables upon access to a full range of success options in adulthood.

Sample and Procedures

The data for this investigation were abstracted from the Marion County Youth Study, an ongoing longitudinal panel study of adolescent males in Western Oregon. In 1965, males who were sophomores in high school in that county were surveyed. Slightly more than a year later, a random sample plus all delinquents of that population were interviewed. The interviews covered a range of demographic, family, school, peer, and attitudinal items. It was at this time the measures of our independent variables were obtained.

Each subsequent year, a questionnaire was mailed to the random sample and to all delinquents. The measures of our dependent variable, access to adult success, were derived from the survey of 1972.

School status was indicated by the cummulative grade point average of the respondent as it appeared in the school records. For our purposes here, we will treat the measure as a simple dichotomy between the academically successful and the academically unsuccessful.

Peer group involvement was indicated by the respondent's estimate of the average number of hours he spent with friends during the week. This measure was obtained from the interviews. We will treat it also as a dichotomy between those with 'high' peer group involvement (more than 6 hours/week) and those with 'low' peer group involvement (less than 6 hours/week).

Our last independent variable, delinquency, was obtained from court records. Again, we will treat it as a dichotomy between the official delinquents and the official nondelinquents.

The two measures of access to success--educational attainment and adult socio-economic status--were obtained from questionnaire responses. Educational attainment was measured according to the respondents answering the question: "how far have you gone in school? Those who had some college experience or more have 'high' educational attainment. The high school graduates or less have 'low' educational attainment. The respondents who indicated they had a white collar job in 1972 according to the Hollingshead Index were classified as having access to 'high' adult socio-economic status. Those who had blue collar jobs were indicated as having 'low' adult socio-economic status. Since the respondents are only five years out of high school, they have not reached their ultimate social status. Thus the indicators would best seem to measure the access the respondents have to a full range of educational and occupational options.

Findings and Discussion

The major institution affecting adolescents is the school. It and its accompaning activities encompass a major portion of the adolescent's day. The logic of our schools leads to the sorting of students who would seem to be recruited into college and into white collar occupations. Our data support this expectation. (See Table 1). Those with passing grades are much more likely to go to college than are the failures. Similarly, the successful student in high school later finds white collar occupations much more avilable to him than is the case for those with low grade point averages. As we had expected, thus, the school dimension to the adoloscent experience has a significant affect upon one's later access to adult success.

TABLE 1

ACCESS TO ADULT SUCCESS BY GRADE POINT AVERAGE

	Cumulative Grade Point Average		
	High		Low
Percentage with High Educational Attainment	84%		43%
Total N	(245)		(221)
		gamma = .74 p .00001	
Percentage with High Adult Socio-Economic Status	72%		53%
Total N	(86)		(191)
		gamma = .38 p .00001	

The second dimension of adolescence that would seem to have an effect upon one's later position in life is the involvement one has with a peer group. While we would expect that peer associations are usual in adolescence, it would seem that those who spend a great deal of time in peer activities may not be participating in the school and family activities usually associated with committed youth. However, this does not seem to be case for our respondents. (See Table 2.) Peer group involvement does not inhibit educational attainment. In fact, those who spend more than six hours per week with their friends are significantly more likely to have some college experience. Peer group involvement has no significant effect, however, upon adult socio-economic status. The amount of time an adolescent spends with his friends does not seem to restrict the range of educational and occuptational options one has in adulthood. In fact, it appears that it may facilitate college attendance.

It may be that a sheer quantitative assessment of peer group involvement is inadequate for an understanding of how one's peer group affects the chances for success in later life. Noblit (1973) has found qualitative measures to be productive in understanding how peer involvement and adult success are related. Commitment to conventional activities may well depend upon the character rather than quantity of peer interaction.

TABLE 2

ACCESS TO SUCCESS BY PEER GROUP INVOLVEMENT

	Low Peer Involvement		High Peer Involvement
Percentage with High Educational Attainment	46		74
Total N	(154)		(273)
		gamma = .76 p .00001	
Percentage with High Adult Socio-Economic Status	29		34
Total N	(93)		(164)
		gamma = .10 p = .15	

Labeling Theory proponents have long maintained that labels about deviancy have a dramatic effect upon one's status in the conventional world. Our data support this. (See Table 3). Youth who have been processed by the juvenile court are much less likely to attend college than are the youth who are not processed. This is also the case, although to a lesser degree, for adult occupational status. The delinquent label is a significant aspect of the adolescent experience, that contributes to or restricts one's options as an adult. However, a delinquency label does not have as much influence upon educational attainment as school status, or even the inverse influence peer group involvement. Delinquency also has an effect upon occupational status but not as large as the grade point average. The delinquency label does seem to have an effect upon access to adult success.

It may be that the effects of one or more independent variables is due to the actions of another variable or combination of other variables. At the second order, we see that grade point average is the only variable that consistently maintains the effect we had hypothesized. (See Table 4.) The relative effect of school status is not as strong for educational attainment as it is for adult socio-ecnomic status (mean percentage difference of 7.5 and 18.5 per cent, respectively). It appears that peer group involvement and delinquency are more important in determining college attendance than they are for one's later occupational status, as we would expect. One's friends and experiences with them would seem to either be supportative of, or detrimental to, being committed to a 'straight' middle class career in late adolescence. However, as time passes and maturational reform occurs, the effects of these variables wane and the importance of status defining variables, such as grade point average become more important.

TABLE 3

ACCESS TO ADULT SUCCESS BY DELINQUENCY

	Not Delinquent		Delinquent
Percentage with High Educational Attainment	63%		44%
Total N	(207)		(163)
		gamma = .37 p = .00001	
Percentage with High Adult Socio-Economic Status	36%		27%
Total N	(121)		(157)
		gamma = .22 p = .01	

Peer group involvement continues to have a negative influence, at the second order contrary to our expectations. It maintains its negligible effect upon occupational status (-4.5 per cent) while maintaining a strong, in fact the strongest, effect upon educational attainment (-18.5 per cent). In any case, the more time one spends in peer association per week the better off one seems to be in later life, especially in terms of the career options which higher education may open up.

The relative effect of delinquency at the second order is opposite its zero order effect upon educational attainment (mean per centage difference of -8.75). When peer group involvement and school status are accounted for, the effect of the delinquency label upon college attendance is slightly positive. For adult socio-economic status, delinquency has a negligible effect albeit in the expected direction. Delinquency seems to be more of a natural consequence of the interaction of school status and peer group involvement than a variable with highly significant independant effects.

Conclusions

It appears that those interested in social stratificaion should take more into account than mere educational attainment as an indicator of experience affecting adult socio-economic status. He appears that the character of the adolescent educational experience should be taken into account. The school procedures and policies themselves may well have and effect upon an adolescent's commitment to conventional success. Peer group involvement did not affect access to adult success as we had expected. This may well be due to extensive peer involvement being a part of most adolescents' experiences. Therefore, the significance of peer involvement may be best determined by trying to assess what

TABLE 4

ACCESS TO ADULT SUCCESS BY GRADE POINT AVERAGE, PEER GROUP INVOLVEMENT AND DELINQUENCY

	High GPA				Low GPA			
	Low Peer Involvement		High Peer Involvement		Low Peer Involvement		High Peer Involvement	
	Not Delinquent	Delinquent	Not Delinquent	Delinquent	Not Delinquent	Delinquent	Not Delinquent	Delinquent
Percentage with High Educational Attainment	56	57	66	71	33*	52	63	72
Total N	(68)	(37)	(81)	(90)	(12)	(29)	(30)	(78)
Mean percentage differences:	Delinquency = -8.75 Peer Involvement = -18.5 Grade Point Average = 7.5							
Percentage with High Adult Socio-Economic Status	41	19*	52	37	10*	27	16*	22
Total N	(39)	(21)	(46)	(49)	(11)	(22)	(18)	(51)
Mean percentage differences:	Delinquency = +3.75 Peer Involvement = -4.5 Grade Point Average = 18.5							

*Due to small n these percentages may not be reliable.

the quality or character of the involvement is, rather than assigning judgements as to what adults may think is the appropriate amount of time spent in pear associations. Lastly, while we found the delinquency label at the zero order to restrict adult options, it appears that the label is little more than a culmination of other adolescent experiences. We expect, as do Polk and Schafer (op. cit.), that the delinquency label is part of the institutional build up of labels that often begins with labels about academic ability. Thus, while we should try to avoid labeling youth as delinquent, an effort should be made to reorganize the logic of education in our society.

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